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ABSTRACT

Teachers transform lives, and the ripple effect goes on for years. Three pertinent questions are asked in this paper: Where does this power come from? What is its source? and What makes teachers so special? Two aspects of these questions are the multiplicity of identities that coexist within each teacher and the passion inside teachers that springs from a core set of values or ethical principles. First, multiple identities are found in teachers. The teacher as circus performer uses the language of circus performance to highlight how adept and versatile teachers are. The teacher as synthesizer refers to those split-second decisions he/she needs to make in any one teaching moment. The teacher as conductor or choreographer relates to the ability to generate discussion that includes and stretches everyone, to create a healthy group life, to recognize and foster a group rhythm, to best sequence activities, and to make all the decisions anyone responsible for a live drama makes continuously. Second, teachers are fiercely passionate about living their beliefs. They draw from a deep well of values, ideals, and principles. From their teachers, students learn not only subject matter, but also what their teachers value about life. (YLB)

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Teachers Transform Lives

*By **Della Bradshaw**, ALBE teacher,researcher and writer.*
***This article** was originally written for and presented at an Adult Learners' Week Dinner for Teachers, **organised** by the City of Greater Dandenong ACE Cluster, on the 7th September 2000.*

Teachers do transform lives. The evidence is all around us. Every hour of every day, the work of teachers results in changes big and small, in our neighbourhoods, in every ACFE region, all around this country. And the ripple effect goes on for years. Each of us could tell many stories about the transformations we've witnessed, about the way lives have been changed forever, thanks to the talents and tenacity of teachers. Let me share with you two stories about teachers, stories that speak on behalf of all the stories we could share together.

The first story concerns a young Middle Eastern woman and her teacher. This young woman, whom I shall call Leila, had been coming to her ESL class at a neighbourhood house for about six months. One day, arriving for class, she noticed a mini-bus parked outside. Her teacher was urging them all to climb aboard: "Today's the day we're off to the Botanical Gardens." None of the fifteen women in the class, all of whom lived within ten kilometres of the city centre, had ever been to the Botanical Gardens. In fact, none of them had even heard of them before last class.

Once there, they could not believe their eyes – the colour, the landscaping, this vast expanse of natural beauty, a world of peace and quiet, a green oasis of such grandeur. The women could hardly believe they were still in the same city, and that these were public gardens, with free access to all. They felt as if they'd been transported on a magic carpet to a magical world far, far away. Leila, in particular, kept asking: "Is this really Melbourne? I thought where I lived was Melbourne."

The next day the teacher arrived early at class, keen to discuss the excursion of the day before. She knew it would be a subject of much conversation and debate for some time. She knew it was a powerful metaphor for the way she saw her teaching – other times, other places, other ways of looking at the world. A metaphor for expansion and expansiveness – geographically, conceptually, emotionally, socially and civically.

The teacher was greeted at the door by an irate husband who expressed strong objection to his wife having been taken away from class without his permission. In fact, the students had been notified in advance and Leila had either forgotten or had chosen not to tell her husband. Leila's husband was most upset. She had accused him, on returning from the Gardens, of tricking her into believing her suburb was the whole of Melbourne. The teacher then spent some time with the husband, explaining the purpose of the excursion, stressing there'd been no secrecy intended, inviting him into class to hear the women's discussion, reassuring him he would be welcome on future excursions. He left, agreeing it would be best if Leila continued with her class.

I find this story deeply moving for many reasons. First of all, it is a reminder about the potential of the simplest acts to transform lives. Leila's world expanded exponentially in a matter of a few hours. With that trip to a place only five kilometres from her home, her whole world changed. Secondly, the power of this story as a metaphor for the work of teaching. Isn't all our teaching about enabling people to discover new worlds and perspectives, to sample life from a different point of view and to see the familiar with new eyes? Thirdly, the wisdom and courage of the teacher in both staying true to her educational ideals and in being culturally respectful. This is truly multiculturalism in practice – finding the common ground in apparently irreconcilable differences, concentrating on the common good.

Recently, that same teacher told me that Leila is a new woman since that memorable day. She walks and talks as a woman of stature. She is enrolling in a Return to Study course next year to get herself ready for University study. And the family visits the Botanical Gardens often.

The poignancy of this story is that it is not an uncommon one. Whether it's an excursion, a book, a newspaper article, a new way of moving or cooking or communicating, in the hands of adult educators, these simple everyday activities transform lives. Just look at what happens in computer classrooms. My second story, featuring Nina, illustrates this.

Nina worked for over forty years in a textile factory. Her busy life left no time for English classes until she was retrenched. Part of the retrenchment agreement included English classes at the local adult education centre. She loved her classes – meeting other women like her, sharing life stories together, starting to realise how much they'd contributed to Australian society as well as to their own families, learning about themselves and the wider world, as well as English. When their teacher suggested a few computer sessions as part of their literacy class, most were reluctant but all agreed to try. Nina and her peers thought they were too old and too uneducated to learn.

The teacher, wisely, went very slowly and gently, introducing a little at a time, always leaving plenty of time for the speaking, listening, reading and writing they loved so much. A day they'll always remember is when Nina first received an e-mail from her grandson visiting the ancestral home in Italy. Suddenly, computers were not threatening machines but, like the phone, a way of bringing people together. Nina's new found sense of strength and freedom did not end there. She decided it was time to write her life story for her

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family, and posterity. She wanted it to be beautiful and durable so she learnt how wordprocessing and basic formatting could achieve this. Nowadays, not only has her status risen in the family – both as author and as someone who can talk about the internet with ease – but also in the wider community. She is now a mentor to a local ethno-specific group wanting to produce a monthly newsletter featuring family histories. These miracles – for they are of this magnitude in the effect they have on individual lives and the communities to which these individuals belong – occur on a daily basis. They are the norm, not the exception. Imagine the effect if every person reading this told two such stories, and I've no doubt you could all tell dozens. Hence my assertion, "Teachers transform lives."

So, I find myself asking: "Where does this power come from? What is its source? What makes teachers so special?" I'd like to spend the rest of this article contemplating these 3 questions. I'll focus on two aspects in particular. First, the multiplicity of identities that co-exist within each teacher. Second, the passion inside teachers that springs from a core set of values or ethical principles.

First of all, the Multiple Identities to be found in teachers. (I much prefer this description to the term 'multi-skilled' that we hear so much about.) I've long struggled to find a metaphor that does justice to the sophisticated work teachers do. Some of the metaphors I've considered are:

Teacher as Alchemist
Teacher as Choreographer
Teacher as Conductor
Teacher as Synthesiser
Teacher as Artist
Teacher as Tour Guide
Teacher as Circus Performer

Nowadays, I realise it was foolish of me to have been looking for one. As if any one metaphor could hold and express it all. Now, I realise, teachers are all these, and lots more as well. Let me elaborate on a few of these to make my point clearer.

Take **Teacher as Circus Performer**. The language of circus performance highlights how adept and versatile teachers are. When I look closely at their work, I see:

Jugglers – teachers juggling the fast moving changes in policy and practice with equilibrium and ease

Tightrope walkers – teachers walking educational and political tightropes with poise and precision

Tamers of savage beasts – teachers taming the terrifying tigers of technologies with grace and courage

Trapeze artists – teachers turning verbal somersaults on the jargon trapeze with flair and confidence

Acrobats – teachers leaping through bureaucratic hoops and dashing through the shifting obstacles of paperwork with speed and dexterity

Then, there's **Teacher as Synthesiser**. All those split-second decisions we need to make in any one teaching moment - synthesising the multitude of realities competing for our attention, harmonising the constantly shifting imperatives that impel us first in one direction and then in another. Imperatives such as: curriculum demands; the emotional, social, linguistic and political climate of the class; employer expectations.; the needs, desires and aspirations of our students; institutional requirements; our own needs, desires and aspirations as teachers; research, preparation and assessment; professional development; peer loyalties. Not to mention, the 'Transforming Lives Transforming Communities' conceptual framework for further education.

And on and on, goes the list of demands on our time, our energies and our creativity. So many thoughts racing through our heads at the one time, so many voices competing for our attention and our allegiance, so many possibilities darting in and out of our imaginations. A bit like being at a busy intersection in peak hour traffic. And yet, day in, day out, continuously making (often split-second) judgments, teachers synthesise all these forces into educationally meaningful activities.

Consider **Teacher as Conductor or Choreographer**. The longer I stay a teacher, the more I appreciate the finer points of the art of teaching . The ability

To generate a discussion that includes and stretches everyone

To create a healthy group life

To recognise and foster a group rhythm

To best sequence activities

To pace myself, when to pause, when to intervene, when not to intervene, when and how to challenge and when to let pass, when and how to begin and end.

And all those other discerning decisions anyone responsible for a live drama has to be making all the time. And we all know, don't we, how deceptively simple this work can look from the outside, this sophisticated work of orchestration.

I could amplify the other identities I mentioned – alchemist, artist and tour guide - but will leave that to your imagination. I'd love to know if you have other metaphors for teaching that you find compelling.

Let me now turn to my second focus, the Passion of Teachers. As well as combining all the roles I mentioned above - circus performer, synthesiser, conductor, choreographer - as well as reconciling all these vocational identities, teachers are fiercely passionate about living their beliefs. They draw on a repertoire of roles and identities, but to do this they draw on something even more profound – they draw from a very deep well of values, ideals and principles. In my experience, the words most often heard when teachers are talking about their work are words like co-operation, dignity, democracy, justice, harmony, freedom – in other words, the language of personal and social transformation.

Teachers know that what they do matters. Teachers know their work makes a difference, to individual lives, and to society. Teachers carry a vision in their heads, one often not immediately obvious to a

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passing observer, a vision of how a particular activity, a particular class and a particular program contributes to a better world. Our work as teachers is about making the vision in our heads come alive in our classrooms. Another way of considering this is to say that, from their teachers, students learn not only about reading and writing, computers and horticulture, cooking and health. They also learn what we as teachers value about life.

From what we do and say, they learn whether we advocate peace over violence; whether we are 'at home' with diversity and difference; whether we encourage emotional and social development as well as mental and technical development; whether we ensure everyone is heard; whether we prize global as well as local citizenship; whether we care about the well-being of all life on earth. As teachers, we have enormous powers and, consequently, enormous responsibilities.

Looking for an image that embodies this rich mix of talents, virtues and influence, I turned to a woman who is equally multi-faceted, multi-dimensional and powerful. I turned to Sally Morgan, an Aboriginal artist from Western Australia. In particular, I turned to one of her paintings, 'Across Australia', one that depicts patterns in the earth as seen from an aircraft window.

For me, this painting equally represents the colourful, complex and complementary patterns that constitute the identity and work of every teacher, something that only becomes clear when we stand back a little. This is an optimistic portrait, one that says to me: "Like these ancient landforms, teachers will be with us for a long, long time – constantly changing, constantly reforming, always leaving their mark."

I'd like to finish with a poem, as a tribute to all teachers here and everywhere, about teachers as artists. It is another way of expressing in words what Sally celebrates in paint. It is called 'Ambidextrous' and was written by Bernice McCarthy.

Teachers DO transform lives. YOU TRANSFORM LIVES. On behalf of your students past, present and to come, "Thank you for making all the difference."

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Ambidextrous

With my hands, I sculpt ...

My left and right
Are opposites:
Yin and yang,
Moon and sun,
Woman and man,
Creative and logical.
They are two separate forces
connected by wrist, arm and shoulder,
to my reconciling body.

One cold, spring morning
When I was eight,
I noticed
How my right hand carried the burden
Of my heavy schoolbag
While my left swung freely at my side.
I thought, "It isn't fair
That my right hand does all the work."
That hand threaded needles,
Wrote tests,
Washed dishes,
Did cartwheels,
And wiped my bum ...
Yet here was the left hand
Off in her own world:
She picked dandelions,
Wore plastic rings and bracelets,
Waved from car windows,
And, at times, she would put
A paintbrush to paper
And an entire world might emerge
From beneath the bristles.

Her frivolity was hardly fair ...
I didn't realise my left hand toiled as well,
Weaving my history into memories.

I didn't know then
That she was collecting the
Images, smells, sensations
That would someday become art ...

But, years later,
When the left triumphed in the studio,
The victory was empty ...

I need the logic of my right hand
For the precision of mathematics,
The intricacy of structure, blueprints that do not limit:

Rather, they allow.

If, like an architect, you have the basic plan –
A house with bedrooms,
Bathroom, kitchen –
You can move beyond.

You can add on an observation tower,
Stained glass, or a labyrinth.
The left will always have the visions.

This was my metamorphosis:
As a butterfly emerging from its chrysalis,

So I grasp my paintbrush in one hand,
My protractor in the other.
It was you who brought my hands close,
All of you, my teachers.

You took both
Left and right and led me,
Ambidextrous now,
(like a child learning to walk)
to the horizon where these opposing lines
can touch and merge.

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